

Period Poverty: A rapid analysis of Suidha Scheme in two districts in Kerala, India

Lakshmi Ullas

M A Scholar, Government College for Women, Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala

Dr Godwin S K

Associate Professor of Economics, Government College for Women, Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala

Abstract: Period poverty refers to increased economic vulnerability women and girls face due to financial burden posed by menstrual supplies. In order to ensure access to sanitary napkins across India, “Suidha Scheme” was implemented in India since 2018. The objective of the study is to understand the availability and utilisation of sanitary napkins through Janaushadhi stores in Kerala, India. The study primarily looks at the availability of sanitary napkins from the perspective of supply chain (retail networks). Newspaper reports were also relied upon as the programme was launched with much fanfare. Since pads are being supplied through the network of Jan Aushadhi stores, a primary survey was undertaken. Ten Jan Aushadhi stores were selected in Thiruvananthapuram and Thrissur districts to understand the stock, availability, sale and frequency of availability of sanitary napkins. Information relating to distance between stores, awareness of the customers, nature of customers etc were collected. The study primarily looks at the issue of availability of sanitary napkins from the point of view of retail chain. One of the major problems is that Janaushadhi stores are in the initial phase of operation and currently has about 300 stores across Kerala. In the district of Thiruvananthapuram, there are 39 stores while in Thrissur, there are 63 stores as on September-October 2020. This means that each customer had to travel many miles to purchase an essential item like sanitary napkin. Almost all stores reported that the shops were filled with some stock in the initial phase that is in late 2018. In the last 6 months, the stores manager has reported shortage every 30 days and only 200 -300 pads supplied per lot which gets over in the first week itself. However, store managers have flagged erratic supply even as there is a rise in demand. All the shopkeepers invariably replied that supply of stocks is highly erratic in terms of the timing and quantity of the stock. Suidha scheme helps to reducing the period poverty gap in India. But it requires maintenance of the stock in the stores and make them available when it is demanded. Better availability of the low-cost sanitary napkins reduces the financial burden on low-income families and helps to reduce period poverty. Since the study looked at the issue from the perspective of retail chain, the taste and responses of the demand side could not be collected and as such a major limitation.

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I. Context:

Menstruation is a biological phenomenon that every girl or woman goes through for a period of her life. It is the part of reproductive cycle where uterine lining is shed blood through vagina. Most of the girls start to menstruate at the age of 10-14 and the average menstruating age is from 13 to 51 years. Unfortunately, poor awareness about menstruation, unscientific attitude, myths and misconceptions adversely affect the social life and amplifies the negativity towards menstruation. Though personal, menarche has radical implications for girl's lifestyle and mobility. Hygiene is individual pursuit but in the absence of sanitation infrastructure it become public issue. Poor sanitary infrastructure and unaffordable sanitary products worsen Menstrual Hygiene Management (MHM).

Across the globe millions of women and girls experience period poverty, i.e., lack of access to sanitary products, menstrual hygiene education, toilets, handwash facilities and waste management. UFPA describes period poverty as the struggle many low-income women and girls face while trying to afford menstrual products. The term refers to increased economic vulnerability women and girls face due to financial burden posed by menstrual supplies. These include not only sanitary napkins and tampons but also related costs such as pain medication and underwear. According to UNICEF, globally 2.3 billion people live without basic sanitation services and in developing countries only 27% of people have adequate handwashing facilities at home. This makes it harder for women and young girls to manage their period safely and with dignity. Period poverty not only affect women and girls in developing countries, it also affects women in industrialized countries

too. Difficulty in affording menstrual products can cause girls to stay home from school and work, with lasting consequences on their education and economic opportunities. It is not only an economic issue but a social and political one as well. Some countries lifted tax on the period products as luxury items, other countries to use it as a form of gender-based discrimination.

India is a country of contrasts, with extreme wealth and poverty and gender-related disparities, resulting in significant variation in health and social indicators among girls and women. Menstruation is still considered as a taboo in Indian society. Government is providing subsidized or low-cost sanitary napkins in order to reduce the period poverty. But these low-cost napkins are poor quality due to low-cost procurement strategy that overlooks the standards and quality. According to 2011 Census there are 336 million menstruating girls and women in India. Indian Ministry of Health shows that only 12% of menstruators have access to sanitary products, rest use unsafe materials like rags, sawdust. Too many people cannot afford period products. One in 4 girls missing one or more school days due to pain, lack of water, hygienic and disposal facilities in school toilets, fear of staining etc. WHO-UNICEF baseline report 2018 indicates that 36% of schools in India had functional incinerators for disposal of sanitary wastes. Mizoram is the only where more than 50% of schools have functional incinerators.

II. Objective

In order to ensure access to sanitary napkins across India, “Suvidha Scheme” was implemented in India since 2018. The scheme ensures access to sanitary napkin across India at Re 1/ pad and the napkins are environmentally friendly. The pads are oxo-biodegradable, which means they break down into “tiny pieces in the presence of oxygen and may then slowly biodegrade”. The objective of the study is to understand the availability and utilisation of sanitary napkins through Janaushadhi stores in India.

III. Methodology

A systematic review of literature on the issue about the status of the scheme. The study primarily looks at the availability of sanitary napkins from the perspective of supply chain (retail networks). Newspaper reports were also relied upon as the programme was launched with much fanfare. Since pads are being supplied through the network of Jan Aushadhi stores, a primary survey was undertaken. Ten Jan Aushadhi stores were selected in Thiruvananthapuram and Thrissur districts to understand the stock, availability, sale and frequency of availability of sanitary napkins. Information relating to distance between stores, awareness of the customers, nature of customers etc were collected. The study primarily looks at the issue of availability of sanitary napkins from the point of view of retail chain. The samples were very less because a larger analysis was not possible due to the context of Covid19. An online sales analysis was also undertaken using major online e-commerce portals like Amazon, Flipkart, Paytm Mall.

IV. Results

One of the major problems is that Janaushadhi stores are in the initial phase of operation and currently has about 300 stores across Kerala. In the district of Thiruvananthapuram, there are 39 stores while in Thrissur, there are 63 stores as on September-October 2020. This means that each customer had to travel many miles to purchase an essential item like sanitary napkin. For example, in a distance of 4 kilometres, there are only two janaushadhi stores in Thiruvananthapuram city. The average distance between janaushadhi shops in Thiruvananthapuram district is much better than Thrissur district. The average distance between the shops in rural Thiruvananthapuram is more than 7 kilometres. Since this is an essential commodity demanding free availability, physical access to janaushadhi stores is the major barrier in supply chain of sanitary napkins.

Almost all stores reported that the shops were filled with some stock in the initial phase that is in late 2018. In the last 6 months, the stores manager has reported shortage every 30 days and only 200 -300 pads supplied per lot which gets over in the first week itself.

However, store managers have flagged erratic supply even as there is a rise in demand. Vendors replied that the napkin packs are bought by women from all sections of society. Ever since the price was reduced to Re 1 from Rs 2.5 in August last year, demand increased but only 30-40 percent of the demand has been met. Some shop keepers reported that not all women are aware of the availability of such a napkin as well. All the shopkeepers invariably replied that supply of stocks is highly erratic in terms of the timing and quantity of the stock. One of the shopkeepers started rationing the product as they would not sell more than 3-4 packets to a customer.

Amazon lists the bio-degradable sanitary napkin but is always unavailable. The same story holds true for Flipkart and Paytm Mall.

V. Conclusion

Common use of pad is prohibitively expensive. The National Family Health Survey 2015-16-point out that there are only 42 percent of the sampled population use sanitary napkins, 62 percent rely on cloth as absorbent and 16 percent use locally prepared napkin. Overall, 58% of women of the age group 15 to 24 use a hygiene method of menstrual protection (IIPS 2018). Economic consideration seemed to be main reason for using cloth instead of pads.

It is estimated that the monthly usage of sanitary napkins in India stands at 500 crore units and the volume of production and availability of suvidha sanitary pads are so low that it may not ensure availability of them in the near future, unless a serious public initiative is undertaken. The program can be considered as a beginning and should not be dropped midway just like many other poll promises. There is a strong preference for the pads by the consumers due to its price advantage and eco-friendly use and the supply problem needs to be fixed immediately.

Better availability of sanitary napkins directly influences reproductive health, education and labour participation; which is closely associated with gender-equality and women empowerment. Suvidha scheme helps to reducing the period poverty gap in India. But it requires maintenance of the stock in the stores and make them available when it is demanded. Better availability of the low-cost sanitary napkins reduces the financial burden on low-income families and helps to reduce period poverty.

Since the study looked at the issue from the perspective of retail chain, the taste and responses of the demand side could not be collected and as such a major limitation. Thus, more studies are needed to understand the feedback from the users of the product so as to generate more meaningful public policies to address period poverty.

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